



*A teacher's experience
with being grouped forces
her to reexamine her beliefs
about leveling learners.*

Cris Tovani

I Got

During a reading workshop I gave several summers ago, a high school principal raised his hand and asked, "Why, after eight years of literacy interventions, are some 9th graders still entering my building as struggling readers?" Every day as I work to "catch up" those strugglers, I wonder the same thing. One experience last fall forced me to consider how educators' beliefs about these learners might be one of the problems.

It all started last June. Thanks to cell phones and satellite technology, I watched with the rest of the world as chaos erupted in the streets of Tehran as the Iranian people protested the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. A week later, when news surfaced about the death of Michael Jackson, I learned that people on Twitter were "tweeting" about it several hours before the major news networks got wind of it. At that moment, I realized that if I didn't start becoming more proficient with technology, I was going to be an ignorant, lonely person.



Grouped

Branded!

I decided that, by the end of the coming school year, I would be, if not technologically proficient, at least comfortable using basic applications. I went out and bought a new phone and the latest Macintosh computer. I signed up for Twitter and got on Facebook. I joined Jim Burke's English Companion Ning and started electronically following people to figure out how this new literacy worked.

It was rough at first, and my learning curve was steep. I had my first major breakthrough when I figured out how to answer my phone without taking a picture of my ear. My 18-year-old daughter temporarily served as my patient teacher, but knowing she would soon be leaving for college forced me to

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look for other experts.

As the school year approached, I actually welcomed the annual technology training that I used to dread. Each fall, we had to learn new software and update our skills in such areas as taking attendance and using the new grading system. Those in the English

department could choose one of two different times to attend training sessions. I cleared my calendar so that I could attend both.

I decided that during the first class, I would try to follow the furious clicks of the presenter, knowing full well that I would be somewhat lost. I'd stay for the second presentation, and after another go, perhaps I would know what I was doing.

My plans were quickly dashed when the groups were announced. We had been strategically placed into specific time slots and were asked to stay with our assigned group. As the names were read, it became embarrassingly clear that we had been grouped by our perceived levels of confidence around technology.



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The majority of teachers in the first session were younger than I, and they were fairly comfortable learning new software. When the names of my group were read, other people started to joke around. They laughed and made smart comments about being the techno-dinosaurs. Some in the group chuckled and in good humor joked back. I didn't say a word. I was embarrassed and indignant that no one had recognized the growth I had made over the summer in learning technology.

I was surprised by my reaction. I never used to care when people teased me about technology. But I was worried now. For the first time, I realized that I had to get on the ball. Suddenly I thought of 10th grader Geraun, a student of mine from last year who had complained that he'd lost hope of ever getting better in reading, despite the fact that he'd been in a remedial reading class since 6th grade. Like Geraun and countless other struggling readers, I began to doubt my abilities.

What I Learned from Being Grouped

Being grouped made me realize that I had a lot more in common with my struggling readers than I thought. It gave me a taste of what struggling

readers must continually face. Before the sting of this experience wore off, I jotted down these insights.

Insight 1: Beliefs affect effort— and effort affects success.

I started to wonder whether our beliefs about struggling readers had inadvertently given students permission to give up. I know from experience that when people believe in my abilities, I work harder to prove them right. When colleagues ask me for help with reading instruction, I know they trust me to know what I'm doing. This belief encourages me to produce and perform.

Expressing belief in someone's ability is powerful—especially if the person dishing out the belief is in a position of authority. As a result of being grouped, I realized that people I respected didn't have a lot of confidence in my computer abilities. This public declaration almost forced me to give up my goal of becoming proficient with technology. My initial reaction was, why try? Because no one believed in my abilities, there was no pressure to perform. I was off the hook.

Just like this process made me—and everyone else—aware of my technology shortcomings, our focus on standardized testing during the past 10 years has

made students aware of their reading shortcomings. Thanks to No Child Left Behind, we have identified struggling readers as early as 1st grade and have shared with them the cold, hard truth about our perception of their abilities. It's no wonder that by high school, they have often given up on themselves. Special reading classes just give some kids a better place to hide.

We have inadvertently given many struggling readers the message that no one believes they can or will read in school. Our low expectations give students an excuse to opt out of improving. Struggling readers, like all struggling learners, need confidence, or they won't take risks. And if they don't take risks, they won't improve. Of course, just saying to struggling readers, "I think you're the best reader in the world!" isn't going to magically make them so. But there is a valuable middle ground. Having reasonable expectations and providing scaffolding with strategy instruction may not be flashy, but it's effective.

Insight 2: Learners need both time and experts to improve.

Not only is it embarrassing for students to be relegated to the low-performing group, but it's also tough on the teacher.

When we group strugglers together, all the experts except the teacher are taken from the mix. So learners become even more dependent on the teacher. The teacher has total control of the group's learning because he or she is the one who holds the information. When there are lots of learners whose needs are great, taking away other possible "teachers" isn't an efficient way to meet needs.

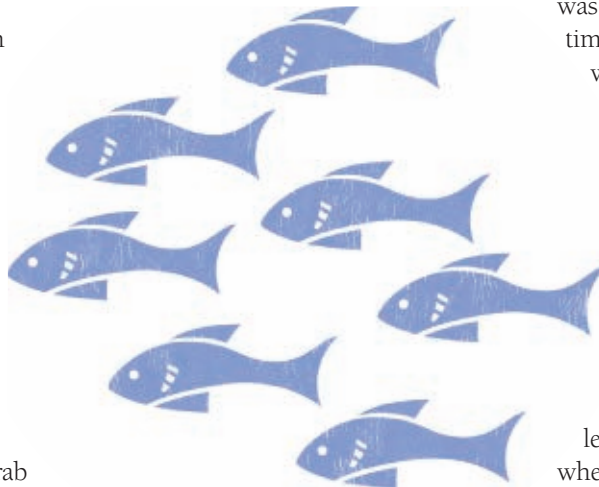
When it was time for me to attend my technology session, I begrudgingly dragged myself down to the computer lab. I knew that none of the people who usually helped me would be in my group. I had to learn the information quickly, and I was stressed because I didn't have the time or confidence to figure it out on my own. Because everyone in my group would need the teacher's help, I knew I couldn't count on much one-on-one help from him.

Luckily, when I arrived, the group before me was still finishing up. So I quickly looked around to see whether I could sit for a few moments by someone who knew more than I did. I rushed to grab the seat next to Scott. He wouldn't stick around long, so I had to work fast. Once Scott left, I was on my own. Ellen, another English teacher, sat on the other side of me. She didn't know much more than I did when it came to computers.

An effective way for me to learn is to find people who are more skilled than I am. These experts serve as models who enable me to "see" what to do. Jean-Claude Killy, the famous French skier who dominated the 1968 Winter Olympics, said, "The best and fastest way to learn a sport is to watch and imitate a champion." I was trying to learn how to set up my grade book—and time was of the essence. With the computer lab full of struggling learners and only one "champion" to help, I knew I was in trouble.

Cordoning struggling students off by themselves simply won't meet their needs. Struggling learners tend to shut down with frustration. They melt into the background until the challenge passes. Sometimes the teacher will take over and do the work for them, but this doesn't help anyone improve.

But what about advanced learners? Some argue that ability grouping is an effective way to meet their needs. Proponents of tracking claim that if such



students aren't together, they will spend all their time helping less able learners. This can pose a problem. However, advanced learners are more confident than strugglers. They tend to be more impatient when their needs aren't met, and this impatience can force them to take a more active role in their learning. Instead of saying, "I don't get it," they typically isolate their confusion by asking specific questions that lead to more targeted feedback.

Insight 3: Past performance is just that . . . past performance.

It's stunning how much stock we put into standardized tests scores. Noted

researcher Gerald Bracey¹ wrote,

In the last 50 years, the United States has descended from viewing tests first as a useful tool, then as a necessity, and finally as the sole instrument needed to evaluate teachers, schools, districts, states, and nations. (p. 32)

These test scores are so neatly packaged that we forget to consider the time in between the tests during which students have opportunities to grow and improve. We need to remember that students are continually learning.

I'm a lot better at technology than I was six months ago. However, at the time of the technology training, people who didn't work with me on a regular basis didn't know that.

They had only my past performance to go by. They didn't know that over the summer, I had changed my attitude about technology and was practicing new ways to use it. They hadn't seen my successes or the confidence I had gained. I felt good about what I'd learned and was pumped to learn more. It was discouraging that when school started, others judged me by my previous performance.

Giving too much weight to old assessments is dangerous. Each year, I am forced to place incoming 9th graders into reading classes using scores that are 6–12 months old. I have to make judgments about students' abilities on the basis of old performances. To make matters worse, secondary students who struggle often don't try because they have a history of not doing well on those tests. Raul, a student of mine, complains that he is a lot smarter than his test scores show, but because he does badly on the tests, he's always in classes for low performers. He complains that he's bored and that he knows the material, but because his teachers think he's dumb, he doesn't even bother to try.

For these reasons, reading teachers in my building work hard to discover the growth students have made since taking the most recent test. At the beginning of the year, they assess students' abilities to find out whether the students are truly struggling readers or just poor test takers. We give our students the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test to get a baseline score on vocabulary and comprehension. We also confer with students and check for fluency, one on one, as they read aloud to us. We have them think aloud as they read so we get an idea of their repertoire of comprehension strategies. In addition, we teach students how to annotate text so we can "see" in the margins what they are thinking.

Each year, we have to see our students with fresh eyes and give them a chance to show new growth. If we are too quick to judge, we risk demoralizing them and putting out the spark that could ignite their learning.

Insight 4: Because reading levels change, we should change how we group.

A low test score doesn't mean that a student reads *everything* below grade level. No one has the same reading level for every kind of text. If I took a reading test using a chemistry textbook, my reading level would be about as good as a 4th grader's. On the other hand, if I were tested using a passage from an anthology of American literature, I would most likely be at the post-secondary school level.

Frequently, high school teachers ask me how to help students who can't read the textbook. When I tell them to "find something else that the students can read," they don't like the answer. The truth is that the best way to improve comprehension is to read. Ironically, the kids who need to be reading the most have the fewest opportunities to do so.



When students experience success each day, they will take the risks they need to take in order to learn.

Teachers worry that if they give students time to read, they will run out of time to teach their content.

Three factors affect readers' ability to understand texts. The first is background knowledge. The more background knowledge students have, the more easily they can understand difficult texts. The second factor has to do with motivation. If readers are highly motivated to comprehend a topic, they have the drive to push themselves through the complexity. Curiosity often motivates me to dig into a text that normally would be above my reading level. The third factor is purpose. If a text is relevant to my life, I am more willing to try to make sense of it. Having a purpose for my reading also helps me determine importance because I have a way to sift and sort information. When any of these three

factors are missing, even easy text becomes difficult to read.

Making Grouping Work

Groups are fine—as long as the teacher frequently changes the configuration of the groups. However, reconfiguring groups is daunting for secondary teachers because they just have too many students to manage frequent group changes.

Grouping wouldn't need to play such a huge role in instruction if students could choose from two or three texts instead of having to all read the same one and if they had an opportunity to discuss what they read with others.

In addition, groups work well when the time the readers are in the group is short. The teacher might deliver a bit of explicit instruction and then let readers practice what they have just learned. One problem I often see in schools is that group time lasts way too long; the teacher becomes the gatekeeper, rarely letting students practice on their own. "Groups" can become whole-class instruction of students who score poorly on standardized tests. This type of grouping is really a classroom management strategy that works for teachers—but doesn't work so well for students.

What Matters Most

To this day, I think about the high school principal's question about struggling readers. It's a good question to ask because something isn't working. In the real world when people try to learn something, they are frequently heterogeneously grouped. Rarely do people improve when they are continually grouped with unsuccessful learners.


Luckily, for my technology training, I didn't have to stay in the same group all year. Once back in the real world, I could decide for myself who I chose to learn from. But for a split second, I

almost believed those people who didn't believe in me.

I came across a passage in Samantha Bennett's *That Workshop Book*² that eloquently speaks to this issue. Bennett writes,

These questions [about instruction] can only be answered if teachers know their students deeply—as people and as learners—with layer upon layer of daily interactions combined with careful listening, close study, and heartfelt care. (p. 7)

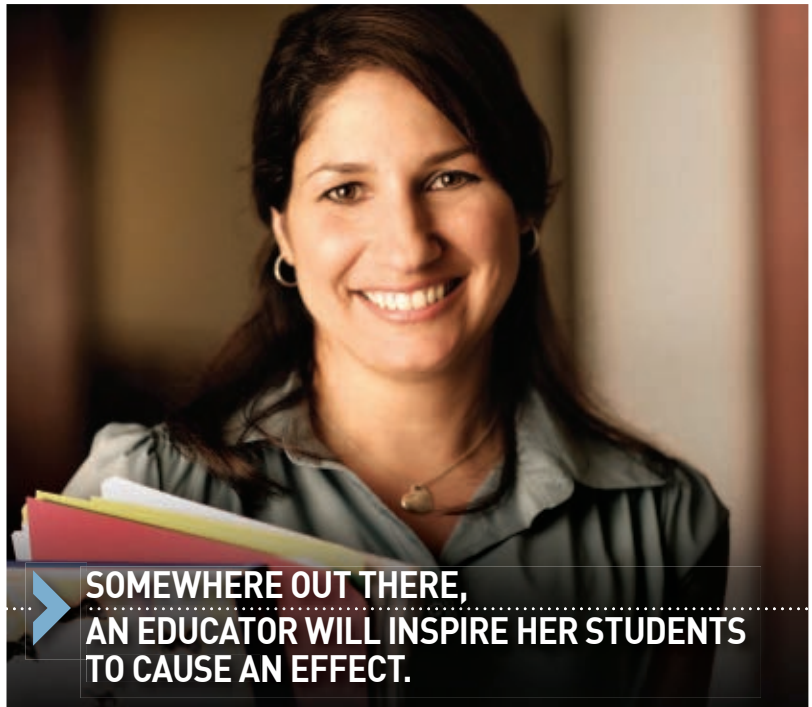
Students need to know that their teachers believe they can succeed. For this to happen, we must, as Bennett writes, know our students well. More important, students need to have faith in their abilities as learners so they can face their learning challenges head on. When students experience success each day, they will take the risks they need to take in order to learn.

Being grouped refocused my attention on what matters most. I must make sure that my instructional practices match my beliefs about students' abilities. I must make available to students the tools, strategies, and experts that will enhance their learning. With scaffolded instruction, choice that drives engagement, and time to practice, our belief in our students' abilities can become their reality. 

¹Bracey, G. W. (2009). Big tests: What ends do they serve? *Educational Leadership*, 36(3), 32–37.

²Bennett, S. (2007). *That Workshop Book*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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